

The Clipper Visits The Oldest House In Duxbury

By FRANCIS BARTON

As you drive around "Dead Man's Curve" on Route 3A, you may see, back from the road, a cottage with a new shining roof. This is the "Hunt House," believed by many to be the oldest house in Duxbury. It was bought by Courtney and Gregg Jordan in August, 1980. Courtney is the daughter of Patty and Bob Fawcett of Washington St. and the sister of Robert "Red" Fawcett of Elder Brewster Rd.

The house has been the subject of a careful study by Dorothy Wentworth, town historian. "In September, 1641," she tells us in a 1968 issue of the *Clipper*, "Edmund Hawes exchanged 10 acres of land for 2,000 feet of sawne boards, and built a house on the Green's Harbor Path near 'Hound's Ditch.'" He had scarcely finished the house when he sold it 1642 to Edmond Hunt.

There appears to be no good reason why the name Hound's Ditch should be given to a New England brook, so the name probably refers to an English watercourse. Green's Harbor Path was very likely an old Indian trail. Duxbury was crisscrossed by these trails, and some of the first roads were laid out along them. It is probable that King Philip's Path was originally one of these Indian byways, and perhaps Metacombet, called King Philip by the English. Grand Sachem of the Wampanoags, when he visited Duxbury with a considerable retinue, took this route.

Some of the Mayflower's passengers preferred Duxbury to Plymouth, in which they showed excellent judgment. John Alden built his house in Duxbury not far from the Hunt House. Elder Brewster made the move to Duxbury 20 years before the house which is now considered our oldest, was built. Dorothy Wentworth, an accurate worker, thinks there is good reason to believe that the "Brewster Lilacs" which bloom in profusion alongside the homestead, were actually planted by him. Myles Standish, one of the first to move across the bay, built his house at the end of Goose Point. It burned down a few years after his death, but the cellar hole is still there, duly marked and fenced off.

Elder Brewster, John Alden and Myles Standish, then, may have called at the Hunt House.

The ceilings are quite low, as they are in many of the old houses in our neighborhood. I am 6'2" and I can just stand straight in the living room. On the other hand, in the living room of the house on Surplus St. owned by Di and David Patterson, which probably dates from the first decade of the 18th century, my head presses against the ceiling.

Let us imagine Myles Standish in his breastplate paying a call at the Hunt House. Since he was short, he could probably stand upright wearing his helmet. There was little interest in the Pilgrim Fathers until Longfellow publicized them in his fanciful tales, and Standish's breastplate rusted through in an East Bridgewater barn. The helmet is conjectural.

A common explanation is that ceilings were low in the first built houses, because people were shorter, and there is some evidence to substantiate this view. Old beds were shorter and have been lengthened if they are to serve today.

The Massachusetts Historical Society endorses the opinion that people were shorter 300 years ago. They point out the fact that the armor of Fitz John Winthrop and Governor Leverett has been preserved and could have been worn only by small men. On the other hand, James Baker, director of research at Plimouth Plantation, believes that the Pilgrims were only slightly shorter than our contemporaries. Low ceilings, he says, conserved the heat and were a matter of lifestyle. Beds were shorter, in his view, because people slept in a half sitting posture, surrounded by bolsters, and he has pictures from the period which show this manner of sleeping.

Pursuing the subject, I called at the Harvard Anthropology Department and was told by a young scientist that we lack evidence on the height of the Pilgrims because we have not been able to measure skeletons. This is not entirely right. The skeleton of Myles Standish was measured.

During the time when the Pilgrims were neglected, the old cemetery on Chestnut St., where Standish is buried, was overrun by cattle. Gravestones toppled and were covered with sand. According to local legend Standish was buried between 2 conical stones. After a search by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, the stones were found and raised.

Standish was twice exhumed, in 1889 and 1891. To me the evidence is overwhelming that the skeleton identified as that of Standish was actually his. Two of Standish's sons died in boyhood and the skeletons of 2 boys of corresponding age were found. In the family grave there were also the skeletons of 2 young women. Part of his will reads, "If I die at Duxburrow, my body to be layed as conveniently may bee to my 2 dear daughters; Lora Standish, my daughter, and Mary Standish my daughter-in-law."



Standing in front of the Hunt House is Robert Fawcett of Washington St. with the new owners, his daughter Courtney and her husband Greg Jordan.

The skeleton was measured at both disinterments, the second time by Doctor W.G. Brown. On both occasions the finding was that he was 5'7".

Now there is firm evidence that Standish was considered short and quite likely acquired the nickname "Captain Shrimp." The men he commanded must have been considerably taller.

I hope no one will be offended when I say that if the effort to preserve the old time spirit of Duxbury is worth making, then the memorial above the grave is in questionable taste. After the Civil War, the federal government gave cannons to almost anyone who wanted them and the town fathers ringed the grave with them. The 2 conical stones are still there, surrounded by the military paraphernalia of another age. Something grand has been obscured, the simplicity of the olden times.

Gravestones cost money and came from England. To commemorate their military leader, someone or some group searched through the wilderness until they found 2 similar stones. In my view, the stones should stand alone, memorials to the human heart. They are simple and grand, like the oldest house in Duxbury.

Even as time is measured in the Old World, all that was a long time ago. When the Hunt House was built, Louis XIII was king of France and Charles I, King of England.

The old spirit has been conserved by the new owners. The only concession to modernity is the loft, which has been converted into a modern bedroom and bath.

Nothing one can say in praise of Duxbury's oldest house exceeds the fact that it was passed down, father to son, in the Hunt family, for 228 years.



Door latch came from the Garrison House in Pembroke.